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No Substitute for Victory

As goes the Iraq War, so go many things

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Throughout history, countries at war have puzzled and even agonized over how to allocate their scarce military resources. This concern has been particularly acute whenever a nation has confronted multiple enemies spread over a wide geographic expanse, all of whom it could not take on at once. Napoleon, for example, defeated several of the powerful coalitions arrayed against him by engaging their Austrian, Prussian, Russian, and British members in rapid succession. During World War II, President Roosevelt chose a “Europe first” strategy that poured American aid into Britain and Russia at a time when Japan was marching from one success to another in the Pacific theater.

Roosevelt did this even though it was Japan, not Germany, that had attacked the U.S. at Pearl Harbor, and despite strong opposition from the U.S. Navy, much of the American public, and many congressional Republicans reluctant to involve America in a European land war. Roosevelt’s decision was driven by the conviction that German military prowess and the possibility of British collapse made the Nazis the most dangerous of the Axis Powers.

It is not surprising, then, that there is a debate now in the U.S. about the proper sequencing of military efforts in the War on Terror. What *is* surprising — and disturbing — is that, at least with regard to Iraq, the debate is more a slugfest than a serious discussion of the war’s underlying strategic questions. The three most important such questions are the connection between the fighting in Iraq and the overarching struggle against Islamist forces worldwide, the impact of possible Iraq outcomes on that broader war, and the prospects for U.S. success in Iraq.

The critics, by and large, maintain that Iraq is not a part of the post-September 11 campaign against radical Islam. They believe that continuing to fight there would not advance the War on Terror, and would even weaken U.S. ability to prosecute it. Their rationale is that combat in Iraq both misdirects American economic and military resources better spent elsewhere and, per the oft-misquoted recent National Intelligence

Estimate, serves as a recruiting poster for jihadists. They also claim that, even if Iraq were lost, the negative strategic consequences would not be serious. By contrast, supporters of our efforts in Iraq hold that the fighting there is an integral part of the war against Islamist terrorism; that, with patience and continued U.S. military investment, a reasonably stable, democratic, and pro-American government can emerge in Iraq; and that the consequences of defeat would be dire.

THE MEANING OF MESOPOTAMIA

How is one to disentangle these competing claims? When the three strategic questions are considered, the war supporters' answers to at least the first two — the connection between Iraq and the broader War on Terror, and the consequences of American defeat in Iraq — are correct.

To begin with, there is no doubt that, in the minds of our enemies, the fight in Iraq, far from being a strategic distraction, is very much part of fundamentalist Islam's engagement with the United States and its allies. While they wage this war worldwide, they view Mesopotamia as the pivotal theater. To them, expelling U.S. forces from these territories is a necessary prelude to the creation of a global caliphate. This is why the jihadists of the world are pouring into Iraq and dying there by the thousands.

In addition to seeking to inflict a military defeat on the U.S., al-Qaeda and Islamists of all stripes regularly rail against democracy as profoundly anti-Islamic, a mode of governance to be opposed at all costs. Notably, the thinking of both the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a rabid Sunni extremist, and Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a rabid Shiite extremist, is deeply hostile to democracy. This is not particularly surprising. The notions of separating the state from religion and letting democratic elections interfere with the divine will are profoundly inconsistent with fundamentalist Islam and its history.

Most critics of the Bush administration do not even acknowledge the Islamists' opposition to democracy; or, if they do, they dismiss it as irrelevant rhetoric. But their position is as foolish as that of the Sovietologists who urged Western policymakers during the Cold War to ignore Soviet doctrinal writings. As was the case with the Soviets, the Islamists' words and deeds match perfectly. Indeed, the fact that the insurgency in Iraq has been so fierce, and has drawn so much support from foreign jihadists, demonstrates the Islamists' conviction that Iraq has become the key strategic theater in the War on Terror, and that attempts to build democracy there must be defeated. The efforts of Iran and Syria — America's foremost enemies in the Middle East — to bring about a U.S. defeat in Iraq further underscore the war's importance.

Iraq matters to the Islamists in a way that, say, Algeria — where they lost a civil war — did not. They do not think it a calamity to be defeated by a secular authoritarian regime, particularly when the U.S. is not directly engaged. Islamist groups have denounced pro-American authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, but not for their democracy deficit. It is, rather, their alliance with the U.S. and their insufficiently Islamic orientation that are anathema to the extremists.

In fact, the extremists find that authoritarian regimes actually aid their strategy. To the extent that such regimes are oppressive and do not provide for the well-being of the populace, the Islamists can ride the wave of popular discontent and channel it to their advantage. Certain Islamist groups may face government repression, as has the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria, but secular authoritarianism does not offer a viable ideological challenge to Islamist teachings, especially since pan-Arab nationalism is an utterly spent force. Not surprisingly, secular Arab leaders don Islamist garb whenever it serves their ends. Saddam Hussein, for instance, adopted fundamentalist rhetoric and launched a massive mosque-building program after his defeat in the 1991 Gulf War.

Iraq matters a great deal in the broader War on Terror precisely because building democracy in the heart of the Islamic world enables us to pose an ideological challenge to our enemies — unlike ineffectual soft-sell efforts to convince Islamists of our basic goodness. Similarly mistaken efforts were made during the Cold War, when much of our propaganda was wasted portraying the U.S. as home to a sophisticated society with a vibrant cultural life, impressive athletic attainments, and no feelings of hostility toward Moscow. Students of the Cold War ranging from George Kennan to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, while differing in many of their policy prescriptions, correctly maintained that the fight could be won only by combining realpolitik policies challenging Soviet power with a strong ideological attack on Communism. What ultimately captured the hearts and minds of the Soviet people was the demonstration that Communism was spiritually bankrupt, and that democracy was not.

People in the Middle East likewise do not live by bread alone. It is true that democracy will enhance their quality of life and mitigate their economic and social grievances — a fact oft trumpeted by the Bush administration. But these are not democracy's most important benefits. Far more essential is its ability to vitiate Islamism's spiritual vigor. Indeed, since radical Islam seems to be far better than Soviet Communism at tugging the heartstrings of the dispossessed and even motivating them to commit brutalities, it is even more important now than it was during the Cold War to undermine the enemy's ideological legitimacy.

The Islamist ideology is animated by the idea that sharia-based governance is both inevitable and the only alternative to the Middle East's existing corrupt and authoritarian regimes. Just as the Soviets understood that the demonstration of one Communist regime's illegitimacy would be a demonstration of all Communist regimes' illegitimacy — the real reason for the enunciation of the Brezhnev Doctrine — al-Qaeda and other Islamists readily grasp that the success of democracy in Iraq would have catastrophic consequences for their legitimacy. Indeed, because Iraq's much-maligned constitution fuses Islam and democracy — unlike, say, the secular Turkish constitution — it poses a uniquely powerful challenge to the jihadist ideology. U.S. critics of the Iraqi government focus solely on its shortcomings and fail to realize that the jihadists view its mere survival — no matter how weak it is, or how plagued by internal fighting, or how tenuous its ability to provide security — as a grave threat. The jihadists know that the establishment of a democratic polity that empowers women and calls for all of Iraq's communities to enjoy political and economic rights would be a fundamental blow to their

cause. This is the main reason Islamic extremists of all stripes have unleashed horrific violence on Iraq.

What about the argument that U.S. involvement in Iraq was a strategic mistake because it empowered the Shiites? Allegedly, this has helped create a radical Iran-dominated Shiite crescent running from Tehran to Baghdad to Beirut, bolstering the influence of the Islamists in the Middle East. Yet this outcome is neither inevitable nor even likely. Despite common religious affinities, the Shiites are far from united. The two key Iraqi Shiite groups — the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq and Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, which are allied with different factions of the Iranian regime — are divided on the policy issues, including whether to establish a strong Shiite region in southern Iraq and whether to expel the U.S. Indeed, the recent outbreak of fighting among Shiites in southern Iraq highlights the extent of their disunity.

Their divisions in turn dampen the enthusiasm of many Shiite leaders for an all-out confrontation with the numerically weaker but more unified Sunnis. Hence they have a keen interest in the continuation of America's military and political presence in Iraq. Meanwhile, a large portion of the Sunni community is concerned that, notwithstanding all the divisions among the Shiites, it will suffer grievously if the fighting escalates.

Critics have portrayed the intra-Shiite discord and the Shiite–Sunni hostility as insurmountable obstacles to U.S. objectives in Iraq, but they are also strategic opportunities. The U.S. should be able to navigate successfully the shoals of Sunni–Shiite strife and intra-Shiite discord just as we played the Sino–Soviet split to our advantage during the Cold War, and the fighting between the Pashtun-based Taliban and the Tajik-led Northern Alliance during the Afghan War. Over the long term, as Vali Nasr of the Naval Postgraduate School argues in a recent issue of *Foreign Affairs*, the U.S. may be able to build a lasting and positive relationship with the Shiite communities in the Middle East. It may even be possible to use American-allied Shiites in Iraq as leverage against the Shiites in Iran.

To be sure, this kind of bold strategy requires staying power and is incompatible with any of the deadline-driven disengagement plans favored by most of the Democrats. The critics who claim that the Western presence in Iraq inflames the insurgency lose sight of the war's ultimate objectives. Engaging the enemy always creates more hatred and fosters more resistance — right up until the enemy is defeated.

THE SPECTER OF DEFEAT

Given these stakes, even partially successful democracy promotion in the Islamic world and the creation of a modestly pro-American and strongly anti-jihadist government in the heart of the Middle East would be a stunning strategic defeat for al-Qaeda and its allies. It would be a brilliant geopolitical stroke, fusing American idealism with the imperatives of realpolitik. Conversely, the consequences of a U.S. loss in Iraq would be manifold and dire. Most obviously, the fates of Baghdad and Kabul are inextricably intertwined. This is because the Taliban and Qaeda elements in Afghanistan would surely be emboldened by a U.S. defeat in Iraq, while the pro-Karzai forces would be demoralized. A defeat in Iraq

would also make it difficult to retain support, both in the U.S. and internationally, for Western efforts in Afghanistan.

More fundamentally, those who claim that the current Hobbesian chaos in Iraq can be neatly separated from other Middle East trouble spots, and that it does not affect America's influence in the region, are utterly wrong. The war of all against all, with nationalism and Islamic extremism thrown in as the major motivating forces, is not limited to Iraq; it occurs frequently throughout the region, appearing in places where American troops have never set foot.

For example, while the Gaza Strip has not seen a level of suicide bombings comparable to Baghdad's, it is rapidly descending into an Iraq-style conflict. Hamas backers of Prime Minister Haniyeh and Fatah backers of President Abbas are battling daily; assassinations of members of these and other Palestinian factions are rampant; and feuds have emerged within both Hamas and Fatah. Regional powers have also become involved, with Iran and Syria backing Hamas and Egypt supporting Fatah. Meanwhile, a new Lebanese civil war — with fighting among the country's Christian, Shiite, and Sunni communities — is a distinct possibility, and religious discord may also emerge in such countries as Jordan and Syria. In this environment, an America that cannot stand the heat in Iraq will be seen as an America that cannot be a credible player elsewhere in the Middle East.

We also know that Islamist forces have perceived a long series of American retreats — in places ranging from Vietnam to Beirut to Mogadishu — as a sign that, in bin Laden's charming words, the U.S. is a "weak horse." His sentiment is not uncommon; Islamists are constantly searching for evidence of their foes' weakness. This is apparent in Hezbollah's intensified militancy following Israel's 2000 pullout from Lebanon; in Shiite claims that Britain's recent withdrawal from Amarah and its adoption of "kinder and gentler" rules of engagement in Basra amount to the beginning of British withdrawal from Iraq, and should be exploited; and in the Taliban's launching of an offensive in Afghanistan when NATO — thought not to have the stomach for a serious fight — assumed greater responsibility there. Perhaps the most telling example of how perceived weakness plays out in the Middle East is the decision of a number of "moderate" Arab intellectuals, in the aftermath of the Israeli military's failure to defeat Hezbollah during the recent fighting in Lebanon, to recant their endorsements of a long-term peace with Israel.

The U.S. retreated from Vietnam after being engaged there politically and militarily for nearly a decade and suffering almost 60,000 war deaths and 150,000 casualties. It paid a huge geopolitical price in the form of emboldened Soviet foreign policy in the 1970s and '80s and a precipitous decline in U.S. credibility worldwide. It would have incurred an even greater cost if not for the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Today, our foes would see U.S. inability to prevail against a determined Islamist insurgency, especially after battling it for a few years and sustaining casualties that are but a small fraction of those we incurred in Vietnam, as definitive evidence of the failure of American will. If the U.S. cannot sustain its war in Iraq, they will reason, it is unlikely to be patient and resilient when confronting future enemies. This conclusion would, to an

extent unseen since the years immediately following Vietnam, dramatically diminish the willingness of any government in the Middle East to cooperate with America.

Developments in Iraq are being avidly watched around the world, from Tehran to Moscow to Beijing to Pyongyang to Caracas. Given the adaptive nature of warfare, all of our enemies, whether Islamist or not, are certain to use insurgency tactics in any future military confrontation with the U.S., opting for suicide bombings and other means of attacking civilians, possibly in great numbers. Not surprisingly, these tactics have already migrated to Afghanistan. Meanwhile, if America expects difficult and politically unsustainable counterinsurgency campaigns to be a component of future conflicts, its willingness to use force — no matter how great the provocation — will be greatly diminished, and the deterrence value of American military power (including the U.S. nuclear arsenal) accordingly degraded.

This dethroning of American military power would embolden all rogue regimes and terrorist groups. But it would particularly embolden our Islamist foes. Their religious fanaticism would lead them to ascribe an apocalyptic significance to American retreat from Iraq, just as they did to the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan. A U.S. loss in Iraq would be taken as a sign that the time had come to launch ever bolder attacks on American soil and against American interests overseas, and to push for the creation of a global caliphate. Thus, an America that fails to stop suicide bombings on the streets of Baghdad, Fallujah, and Ramadi is likely to face them on the streets of New York, Washington, and Los Angeles.

The bottom line is that, with our ability to project power against the Islamist forces dramatically diminished, we would have to fight a largely reactive war, focusing mainly on homeland defense against an emboldened enemy. History's lessons concerning such warfare are not encouraging. To take but one example, the Roman Empire in the 4th century ceased strategic offensive operations and, ultimately, was overwhelmed by the barbarians.

IS IT WINNABLE?

These stark realities have become so evident that, in the last several weeks, even some Democratic critics of the war have begun to concede that U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, no matter how it is dressed up, would be an unmitigated strategic catastrophe. And yet — with astonishing cynicism — they have continued to blast the administration for remaining committed to victory, while claiming that retreat is both inevitable and must be handled as a bipartisan endeavor.

There are, of course, those who claim that the violence in Iraq, and particularly the U.S. failure to stabilize Baghdad over the last several weeks, demonstrates that military victory is impossible. A recent *New York Times* editorial made this point with characteristic understatement: "No matter what President Bush says, the question is not whether America can win in Iraq. The only question is whether the United States can extricate itself [without calamitous results]." Yet the notion that the American people, who continued to fight at Valley Forge, Shiloh, Iwo Jima, and Normandy, who

persevered and won numerous wars against difficult odds, cannot prevail against the forces of chaos and jihad in Iraq is absurd on its face.

Given the dire consequences of defeat, U.S. policy must be to do everything possible to prevail. Unless the critics acknowledge this strategic reality, their recommendations concerning the military, political, and diplomatic aspects of U.S. Iraq policy cannot be taken seriously. This does not mean that new military, political, and diplomatic solutions should not be tried. In fact, contrary to the claims of critics who would have us believe that the U.S. has been lurching from one mistake to another, American military operations in Iraq have been remarkably flexible, promptly absorbing lessons learned and constantly innovating.

There are no easy shortcuts to victory. Counterinsurgency campaigns are won by staying in the fight and grinding down the insurgents. Defeating the insurgencies in Malaysia and Algeria took years of hard fighting, with high civilian and military casualties. Convening new diplomatic conferences with Iraq's neighbors, "redeploying" U.S. forces out of Iraq, withdrawing them from combat in major cities, sternly telling the Iraqi government to crack down on Shiite militias, and many other "cures" advanced by critics are in fact placebos. Some of them are positively harmful, such as the notion that we should abandon our pro-democracy efforts and help establish a "strong" government in Baghdad to restore stability. This approach would in fact not make it any easier to provide security, and would vitiate the strategic benefits of building democracy in Iraq. In any case, all of these "solutions" are meant primarily to obfuscate the basic reality of the conflict: We and our Iraqi allies are either going to win by bringing down the level of violence to acceptable levels, with positive political consequences to follow; or we are going to lose. Everything else is window dressing.

While further innovations and greater flexibility are needed, the administration's major — and heretofore unfulfilled — task is to convince the American people that the consequences of defeat in Iraq would be disastrous. In a very real sense, the fate of Iraq is determined more in the streets of Washington than in the streets of Baghdad. Americans need to be told again and again that, despite the costs and sacrifices, continuing the fight until a reasonably stable and democratic government holds sway in Iraq is the only way to win the War on Terror. The worst message to send is that victory is impossible and we must now choose between the disastrous and semi-disastrous scenarios attendant upon defeat.

Critics who claim that the Iraq War is not of pivotal importance to our existential fight with fundamentalist Islam are dead wrong. While some of them, such as George Soros and Ted Turner, at least honestly acknowledge their mistaken belief that the struggle against radical Islam is not a war at all, the rest deploy warlike rhetoric without understanding what the war is about. To say, as John Kerry has, that we are really only at war with the group that last attacked us on American soil (al-Qaeda), or to obsess over the fact that Saddam Hussein did not help plan September 11, is to denude the war of its strategic meaning.

Adolf Hitler had nothing to do with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Japan and Germany were not even coordinating their war strategies against a common enemy, the Soviet Union. Indeed, Japan rather foolishly chose not to engage Russia in the winter of 1941 when the Germans were pressing it hard to do so, and this allowed Stalin to pull Soviet forces from the Far East and rush them to the gates of Moscow. Our World War II foes were animated by different and even inconsistent ideologies. Yet no serious military historian would question that combat with Nazi Germany in the European and African theaters was a part of a broader epochal struggle against the Axis Powers. Likewise, the streets of Baghdad, the dusty roads of the Sunni Triangle, the back alleys of Kabul, and the mountains of Peshawar are all theaters in the global struggle against the Islamists. The surest way to hand them victory is to lose sight of this reality.

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